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David W. Smit

The Later Styles of Henry James

Of all authors Henry James is most closely identified with a particular style—the style of the fiction he wrote late in his life. Many critics have tried to construct a model of James's prose by pointing out those features of his style which make it most distinctive, but they restrict themselves to James's fiction. For example, Seymour Chatman cites the following features as typical of James's fiction, and in a number of cases he compares James's prose with that of four other writers to show that these features are more common in James's work: intangible nouns as subjects of sentences; the use of logical terms such as "idea," "impression," "form," and "essence"; the use of psychological verbs and extensive nominalization; the placement of active agents in "oblique" grammatical positions; and an extensive use of deixis, cleft sentences, and expletives.[1] Other critics have added their own ideas of what makes James's style typical or distinctive. R. W. Short cites an average sentence length for Jamesian prose of 35.3 words and a heavy use of sentences with loose conjunctions, as well as inverted sentence order, parenthetical interruptions, and an emphasis on relating expressions. Leo Hendrick and William F. Smith, Jr., have pointed out that James's late style is more complex and uses longer sentences than his earlier style. The only critics I know who argue that James's late style is really quite various are Charles R. Crowe and Kathleen Komar, but Crowe and Komar only look at selected passages from *The Wings of the Dove.* Short, Hendrick, and Smith look at a wider range of James's writing, but they too limit themselves to the fiction.

Of course, whether James's fictional style is consistently the same or really quite various depends on the features we choose to look at and the level of our analysis. Chatman looks at 18 features, four of which are carefully chosen from selected passages of 200 sentences in order to distinguish James's style from that of four other novelists: Forster, Conrad, Gissing, and Butler. It is not surprising that he finds James's late style considerably different from those of other writers. At this level of analysis we might agree with Leo Hendrick that "the late style is, of course, *sui generis*, and uniformly so: all of James's fiction after, say, 1900 immediately identifies itself as Jamesian" (3). On the other hand, if we analyze particular passages as Ruth Yeazell and Kathleen Komar have done, it is easy to demonstrate that much of James's fiction does not contain certain devices and techniques which we associate with him and that particular devices and techniques which he did often use result in very different and particular significance in each instance. At this level of close

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reading, each use of a device or technique is different and particular. Our assertion that James's late style is the same or various, then, ultimately depends on how we define James's style, what features we look at, and what we mean by "same" and "different."

Often, however, we have difficulty keeping our definitions and distinctions clear and consistent. Thus, Scholes and Kellogg can argue that James's use of point of view is distinctive but that it still results in an "ineluctable rigidity" of style (271). And Yeazell can demonstrate how James's use of free indirect discourse can result in particular significance and still point out "the consistent stylization of James's language—those striking idiosyncrasies of cadence and diction that enable us to recognize virtually any passage, whatever its subject or ostensible source, as unmistakably Jamesian" (12-13).

Implicit in many of the characterizations of James's style is the notion that James had to write the way he did, that his "consistent stylization" was largely unconscious, a necessary result of his "vision" or personality, or simply a mere habit.[2] Often offered as evidence for this notion of the late style is the claim that the late style is an "oral" style since much of it was dictated, that James wrote as he spoke.[3]

If, however, we look at James's writing as a whole, not just the fiction, we will see that James's discourse is much more flexible and varied than he is usually given credit for, even by his admirers. In fact, James did not always write in the style we often attribute to him, and that is to be expected: the forms of language we use are limited by the demands of various genres and rhetorical situations.

Carl Klaus has pointed out the difficulties of identifying an author with a particular style, but often his wisdom has been ignored, especially in regard to James. Klaus cites four radically different passages:

> About this time I met with an odd volume of *The Spectator*. It was the third. I had never before seen any of them. I bought it, read it over and over, and was much delighted with it. I thought the writing excellent, and wished, if possible, to imitate it.
>
> Forasmuch as the enemies of America, in the Parliament of Great Britain, to render us odious to the nation, and give an ill impression of us in the minds of other European powers, have represented us as unjust and ungrateful in the highest degree; asserting on every occasion, that the colonies were settled at the expence of Britain; that they were, at the expence of the same, protected in their infancy; that they now ungratefully and unjustly refuse to contribute to their own protection. . . .
>
> There is in every village a vacant dwelling, called the strangers' house. Here they are placed, while the old men go round from hut to hut, acquainting the inhabitants, that strangers are arrived, who are probably hungry and weary; and every one sends them what he can spare of victuals, and skins to repose on.
>
> Be studious in your profession, and you will be learned. Be industrious and frugal, and you will be rich. Be sober and temperate, and you will be healthy. Be in general virtuous, and you will be happy.[4]

Each of these passages was written by one man—Benjamin Franklin. Klaus goes on to discuss the implications of one man writing in such a wide variety of styles:

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> Given four passages so different in style, one could hardly believe they were written by a single man, and yet they were. All are by Benjamin Franklin.
>
> In view of this perplexing situation, one might well be moved to ask which one of these styles *is* the man; and the answer of course would be that all of these styles are the man, the corollary of which is that no single one of them fully represents Franklin, that none of these styles is the man. Each of them is in a sense an invention of Franklin, a fictional personality he creates to meet the needs of a different purpose, audience, or occasion. . . . Tentatively, then, we might say that style is the result of a complex set of mental activities, beginning within the man, moving out to the world, as private purposes become shaped by the exigencies of public communication, and returning once again to the man, when the writer chooses the precise form in which to accommodate himself to the world and its conventions. (57, 59)

If we look at a range of James's writing over a particular period of time, we will see how varied his style really is, and if we compare a number of James's writing styles with various reconstructions of his speech, we will see that James's talk is radically different from much of his writing.

Fortunately, James was a prolific writer, not only of fiction and criticism but also of letters, personal essays, and travelogues. In addition, he kept a notebook. By correlating James's various letters and notebook entries with his correspondence with James B. Pinker, his agent, as reported by Leon Edel, I have managed to assemble a representative sample of James's writing in various genres over a period of several months during the winter of 1899 to 1900, just before he began to write *The Sacred Fount*.[5] These writings are listed in Figure 1.

Unpublished Writing

Letters: On October 13 to Mrs. A. F. de Navarro and to Sidney Colvin
On November 12 to Edmund Gosse and to Mrs. Henrietta Rubell
On November 20 to H. G. Wells
On November 24 to Charles Eliot Norton

Notebook Entries: On October 5 and November 11 and 12

Published Writing

Fiction: "The Faces" (later called "The Two Faces"), sent to Pinker on October 11 at a time when James was writing approximately a story a week

Non-fiction: "The Saint's Afternoon," a travel piece, and "The Future of the Novel," a piece of criticism for a "universal anthology," both written some time in the winter of 1899–1900

Fig. 1. Selected Writings

Because the most common characteristics associated with James's late style are long complicated sentences and abstract diction, with an emphasis on the mental life of the characters, I have compared each of these kinds of writing as to average sentence length, the kinds of nouns James used as subjects, and the kinds of verbs in main clauses. (I will discuss the complexity of James's sentences later.) The results, which can be seen in Table 1, show a sharp

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Table 1

Features of James's Writing in Various Genres

	Private		Published		
Feature	Letters	Notebooks	Travel Writing	Criticism	Short Story
Sample Size					
No. of Words	2,651	1,448	3,471	2,329	1,932
No. of Sentences	130	63	93	72	59
Average Sentence Length					
Words/Sentence	20.4	22.98	37.3	32.35	32.75
Percentage of Nominals as Subjects of Main Clauses					
Active Agents	59.2%	50.7%	19.2%	7.2%	47.5%
Tangible Nouns	5.6%	0.0%	14.6%	1.0%	5.0%
Combined Intangibles	35.2%	49.3%	66.2%	90.7%	47.5%
Nouns	19.0%	29.6%	45.0%	51.5%	21.25%
Deictic Pronouns	7.8%	11.3%	8.6%	27.8%	6.25%
Expletive—it/there	8.4%	8.5%	12.6%	12.4%	20.0%
Percentage of Verbs in Main Clauses					
Stative	30.1%	21.4%	50.0%	49.0%	40.7%
Active	68.2%	78.6%	43.6%	39.2%	54.3%
Passive	1.7%	0.0%	6.4%	11.8%	4.9%

difference between what we might call James's private style and his public style.

The letters and notebook entries contain on average much shorter sentences, many more active agents as subjects, considerably more active verbs, a more direct forceful syntax, and fewer of the mannerisms we associate with James's novels and stories. In some cases, the contrast is especially striking. In the letters, for example, the average sentence length is twelve to seventeen words shorter than in the published fiction and non-fiction (from 20.4 words per sentence in the letters to 37.3 words per sentence in "The Saint's Afternoon"), while active agents as the subject of a sentence occur with much greater frequency (from 59.2 per cent of the total in the letters to 7.2 per cent in "The Future of the Novel"). Regarding James's use of verbs, I found that verbs of mental action are entirely dependent on a description of a character thinking so that in a critical essay such as "The Future of the Novel" verbs of mental action virtually disappear. To distinguish among the genres, therefore, I counted stative verbs (forms of *be* and *have* followed by objects or complements), active verbs, and passives in main clauses. Clearly, the letters and notebook entries

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have more active verbs in main clauses by a wide margin (68.2 per cent in the letters and 78.6 per cent in the notebooks, as opposed to 43.6 and 39.2 per cent in the published nonfiction).

In order to determine whether the differences between James's private and public styles were significant, I submitted the figures from Table 1 to a variety of statistical tests. I grouped both letter and notebook samples together as Private Writing and determined their combined average sentence length and the combined percentage of each kind of noun and verb in each of the major categories. I did the same for the figures for travel writing, criticism, and short story, grouping them together as Published Writing. I then conducted a median test on the differences between the combined average sentence length of the two groups and a $\bar{z}$-test of significance for the difference between the combined percentages of each kind of noun used as a subject and for the difference between the combined percentages of each kind of verb in the two groups. Because of the extremely small size of the sample of passive verbs, I had to use a X^2 test of significance for the difference between the combined percentages of the passive in the two groups. The results are summarized in Table 2. The differences were significant in all seven categories.

I might add that James's published work also exhibits considerable variety, enough variety so that the differences between the private and published writing are not obvious. The short story has more than twice as many active agents as subjects than the travel writing and almost nine times as many as the criticism (47.5 per cent for the short story as opposed to 19.2 per cent for the travel writing and 7.2 per cent for the criticism). The criticism, on the other hand, has almost twice as many combined intangibles as subjects than the short story (90.7 per cent as opposed to 47.5 per cent). The travel writing, as we might expect from a description of places, has the most tangible nouns as subjects (14.6 per cent as opposed to 1 per cent in the criticism and 5 per cent in the short story). The differences are less great for sentence length and the use of verbs, although the criticism does contain twice as many passives as the short story (11.8 per cent as opposed to 4.9 per cent). However we define James's published style, James did vary that style to meet the requirements of the topic and genre he was involved with at the time.

I have found it impossible to devise a reliable way to measure the relative complexity of James's sentences and the degree to which he interrupts the main flow of his syntax. A tentative count of simple, compound, and complex sentences revealed no great difference among the various genres, and the many ways in which James embeds phrases and clauses within one another defeated my attempt to construct a reliable scale of complexity. Nevertheless, it is clear to me that in the letters and notebooks James's sentences are less complex than in the published work, if only because they are shorter. A few examples will have to suffice. Here is the opening of James's letter to Henrietta Reubell, in which he discusses his intentions in writing *The Awkward Age*:

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Table 2

Statistical Tests of Differences Between James's Private and Published Writing

Feature	Private	Published	Test Statistic (degrees of freedom)	Probability
Average Sentence Length				
Words/Sentence	21.2	34.5	X^2=65.7[a] (df=1)	p<.001
Percentage of Nominals as Subjects of Main Clauses				
Active Agents	56.8%	22.6%	$\bar{z}$=8.419[b]	p<.001
Tangible Nouns	4.0%	8.2%	$\bar{z}$=2.028	p<.05
Combined Intangibles	39.2%	69.2%	$\bar{z}$=7.202	p<.001
Percentage of Verbs in Main Clauses				
Stative	27.6%	47.4%	$\bar{z}$=4.783	p<.001
Active	71.1%	44.9%	$\bar{z}$=6.194	p<.001
Passive	1.2%	7.7%	x^2=78.8[c] (df=1)	p<.001

[a] Median test (Guilford and Fruchter)

[b] $\bar{z}$-test of significance for the difference between uncorrelated proportions (Guilford and Fruchter)

[c] x^2 with Yates's correction for continuity (Guilford and Fruchter)

> Dear Miss Reubell, I have had great pleasure of your last good letter and this is a word of fairly prompt reconnaissance. Your bewilderment over *The Awkward Age* doesn't on the whole surprise me—for that ingenious volume appears to have excited little *but* bewilderment—except indeed, *here*, thick-witted denunciation. A work of art that one has to *explain* fails in so far, I suppose, of its mission. I suppose I must at any rate mention that I had in view a certain special social (highly "modern" and actual) London group and type and tone, which seemed to me to se prêter à merveille to an ironic—lightly and simply ironic!—treatment, and that clever people at least would know who, in general, and what, one meant. But here, at least, it appears there are very few clever people! One must point with fingerposts—one must label with *pancartes*—one must explain with *conférences*! The *form* doubtless, of my picture is against it—a form all dramatic and scenic—of presented episodes, architecturally combined and each making a piece of the building; with no going behind, no *telling about* the figures save by their own appearance and action and with explanations reduced to the explanation of everything by all the other things *in* the picture. (*LET* 333)

Most of the complexity in this letter is entirely a matter of short adjectival or noun clauses ("that one has to *explain*," "that I had in view a certain special

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social [highly 'modern' and actual] London group and type and tone"), appositives and prepositional phrases (as in the last sentence). Most of the parenthetical interruptions are short appositives ("lightly and simply ironic!" "a form all dramatic and scenic"). Contrast this kind of complexity with that of longer adverbial clauses, also parenthetically interrupted, in "The Future of the Novel":

> But for its subject, magnificently, [the novel] has the whole human consciousness. And if we are pushed to a step farther backward, and asked why the representation should be required when the object represented is itself mostly accessible, the answer to that appears to be that man combines with his eternal desire for more experience an infinite cunning as to getting his experience as cheaply as possible. He will steal it whenever he can. He likes to live the life of others, yet is well aware of the points at which it may too intolerably resemble his own. The vivid fable, more than anything else, gives him knowledge abundant yet vicarious. It enables him to select, to take and to leave; so that to feel he can afford to neglect it he must have a rare faculty, or great opportunities, for the extension of experience—by thought, by emotion, be energy—at first hand. (*FN* 33)

The most complex sentence in this passage, the second one, achieves its complexity by a series of embedded clauses—an adverbial clause modifying a noun clause which serves as the object of a verb in another adverbial clause. And in the last sentence an infinitive phrase with a noun clause as its object ("to feel he can afford to neglect it"), which in transformational theory is a deleted form of a longer sentence ("someone feels that . . ."), is embedded in an adverbial clause.

When James combined the short appositive interruptions of the letters and the longer, more complex sentences of his published work with a few other mannerisms, such as an inverted sentence order and a preference for deictic pronouns as subjects, he could produce the kind of prose we most often identify as the late style. Here is a selection from James's travel writing, "The Saint's Afternoon," which I hope needs no comment:

> The church-feast of its saint is of course for Anacapri, as for any self-respecting Italian town, the great day of the year, and the smaller the small "country," in native parlance, as well as the simpler, accordingly, the life, the less the chance for leakage, on other pretexts, of the stored wine of loyalty. This pure fluid, it was easy to feel overnight, had not sensibly lowered its level; so that nothing indeed, when the hour came, could well exceed the outpouring. All up and down the Sorrentine promontory the early summer happens to be the time of the saints, and I had just been witness there of a week on every day of which one might have travelled, through kicked-up clouds and other demonstrations, to a different hot holiday. There had been no bland evening that, somewhere or other, in the hills or by the sea, the white dust and the red glow didn't rise to the dim stars. Dust, perspiration, illumination, conversation—these were the regular elements. (*SA* 350)

If we compare this passage with the direct simplicity of a more typical letter, one not concerned with the problems of art, we will see the full range of James's style. Here is the beginning of a letter to Sidney Colvin, written in October of 1899, in which James discusses his reaction to a collection of letters by Robert Louis Stevenson:

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> My dear Colvin, Many things hindered my quietly and immediately reabsorbing the continuity of the two gathered volumes, and I have delayed till this the acknowledgment of your letter (sent a few days after them,) I having already written (hadn't I?) before the letter arrived. I have spent much of the last two days with them—beautifully and sadly enough. I think you need have no doubt as to the impression the constituted book will make—it will be one of extraordinary rare, particular and individual beauty. I want to write about it really critically, if I can—i.e. intelligently and interpretatively—but I sigh before the difficulty. Still, I shall probably try. (*LET* 330-331)

Clearly, the difference between James's private and public styles cannot be explained by his habit of dictation. James wrote his notebook entries out longhand, but his letters were both handwritten and dictated. Leon Edel's edition of the letters indicates whether the letters exist in manuscript or typescript, and it is impossible to distinguish between the two.[6] According to Theodora Bosanquet, James's secretary from 1907 to the end of his life, his plays and the first drafts of short stories were also written out longhand, but for short stories, according to Bosanquet, James "allowed himself a little more freedom, dictating them from his written draft and expanding them as he went to an extent which inevitably defeated his original purpose" (248). For novels, James dictated everything from the preliminary character sketches and outline of the plot through all the various revisions to the final form. Thus, except for the novels and notebooks, there is no way to clearly distinguish between James's handwritten and his dictated styles.

James's late style is often defended as an oral style because the published work was dictated, and yet, rather ironically, most of the published anecdotes we have that try to capture James's speech show it to be closer to the style of the letters and notebooks, the simpler style, than to the style of the more complex published work. The following example from Arthur Benson, who met with James in January of 1900, about the time of the work I have been citing, is typical:

> [James] talked of Mrs. Oliphant, Carlyle—whatever I began.
>
> "I had not read a line that the poor woman had written for years—not for years; and when she died Henley—do you know him, the rude, boisterous, windy, headstrong Henley?—Henley, as I say, said to me, 'Have you read *Kirsteen*?' I replied that as a matter of fact, no—h'm—I had not read it. Henley said, 'That you should have any pretensions to interest in literature and should dare to say that you have not read *Kirsteen*!' I took my bludgeoning patiently and humbly, my dear Arthur—went back and read it, and was at once confirmed, after twenty pages, in my belief—I laboured through the book—that the poor soul had a simply feminine conception of literature: such slipshod, imperfect, halting, faltering, peeping, down-at-heel work—buffeting along like a ragged creature in a high wind, and just struggling to the goal, and falling in a quivering mass of faintness and fatuity. Yes, no doubt she was a gallant woman—though with no species of wisdom—but an artist, an artist—!"
>
> He held up his hands and stared woefully at me . . .
>
> (Benson, qtd. in Nowell-Smith 138-39).

James's oral style in this and other reconstructions collected in volumes by Simon Nowell-Smith and Norman Page lacks the intangible subjects, the long

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adverbial clauses, and the complex parenthetical interruptions of the published work. Most of the parenthetical interruptions here are normal occurrences in speech. The only thing unusual is the long list of adjectives to describe Mrs. Oliphant's work, and in this instance James is obviously building up detail for dramatic effect. Page's description of James's speech seems most accurate: "The amplitude of James's slow delivery, his hesitations and repetitions, his groping for the unpredictable but satisfyingly apt word, his rejection of inferior locutions . . ." (xiv-xv). The complexity of James's speech is one of appositives and lists and parenthetical asides, while he was groping for the word he wanted. It is not the complexity of intangibility and subordination. Here is another example from Elizabeth Jordon:

> 'Eliminating—ah—(very slow) eliminating—ah—eliminating nine-tenths—(faster) nine-tenths—nine-tenths of—of—of—of (very fast) what he [Henry Savage Landor] claims (slower) of what he claims—of what he claims (very slow) there is still—there is still—there is still (very much faster) enough—left—e-nough left (slower) to make—to—make—to—make—a remarkable record (slow) a remark—able record, (slower) a remarkable record (very slow, with every word heavily emphasised).'[7]

The wide range of James's writing style should put to rest the old notion still common in some circles that the late style had become mere habit or that it was a necessary extension of his practice of dictation. James could write as simply and directly, as conversationally and conventionally as anyone. For his public discourse he chose not to, and our job as critics is not to dismiss that style but to discover the thematic and aesthetic rationales for why the Master used the language he did.

Notes

[1] Chatman expands on the work of Vernon Lee 244-46 in his treatment of James's use of logical terms. In his treatment of James's use of psychological verbs, Chatman relies heavily on Michael Shriber.

[2] For an argument that James's perception and vision are directly translated into his style, see Ohmann 200-03. For an argument that the late style is the result of psychological factors, see Maini 186-88, although Maini also asserts that the style reenforces the themes of the fiction. For an argument that the late style was mere habit, see Halverson. In addition, many critics who assert that the late style is essentially consistent or the same are implying that at some level James was doing something over which he may have had no conscious control.

[3] See, for example, Edel 176-77. For various reconstructions of James's speech in the days before tape recorders, see Simon Nowell-Smith 16-17, 107, 114-15, 141 and Page 75, 107.

[4] Benjamin Franklin, quoted in Klaus 56.

[5] Edel 317. The editions I have used to sample James's writing during this period are as follows: *The Future of the Novel*, referred to in the text as *FN*; *The Letters of*

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Henry James, referred to in the text as *LET*; *The Notebooks of Henry James*, referred to in the text as *NOT*; "The Saint's Afternoon," in *Italian Hours*, referred to in the text as *SA*; "The Two Faces," in *The Complete Tales of Henry James*, Vol. 11, referred to as *TF*. The particular passages are as follows:

The Letters: To Mrs. de Navarro (*LET* 328)
To Sidney Colvin (*LET* 330-32)
To Edmund Gosse (*LET* 332)
To Henrietta Rubell (*LET* 333-35)
To H. G. Wells (*LET* 335-36)
To C. E. Norton (*LET* 337-39, up to the postscript)

The letters are dated from October 13 to November 24, and in the Lubbock volume are in this order. I omitted a letter in the form of a tale dated October 13.

The Notebooks: All of the entries for October 5, November 11, and November 12 (*NOT* 293-97); I omitted a list of prospective names for characters on page 295.
"The Saint's Afternoon": The first four sections (SA 345-55)
"The Future of the Novel": The first four paragraphs (*FN* 30-36)
"The Two Faces": All of the narrative paragraphs, those not dominated by dialogue (TF, 239, 241, 244-45, 248, 251-53)

To sort out the various features I used the following rules:

1. I counted each member of a compound subject as a separate subject and each member of a compound verb as a separate verb.
2. I counted the deleted subjects of commands as active agents.
3. I counted the main noun in a fragment as a subject if it seemed to be a subject with a deleted predicate; I did not count it if it seemed to be an object. In the following example from the notebooks I counted "spell" and "charm" as subjects because they seemed parallel to "something," the subject of the previous sentence: "(Oh, the kind little, sweet little spell, the charm, that still lurks in that phrase and process—small, sacred relic of those strange *scenario* days!)."
4. I counted appositives as subjects if they seemed to function as such with a deleted conjunction. In the example above, "the charm" seemed to me more like a compound than an appositive; so I counted it as a subject.
5. I counted indefinite pronouns and "one" as intangible nouns, not as active agents.

[6] I used Lubbock's edition of the letters for this study because the final volume of the Edel edition was not yet in print. Lubbock's edition does not indicate how the letters were composed. According to the Edel edition of the letters, however, the one on November 24 to Charles Eliot Norton was dictated (*Henry James: Letters* 120). Certainly by my analysis, the letter to Norton differs from the others in my study in two ways: it has substantially longer sentences and a much higher proportion of stative verbs in main clauses, which would indicate that it may have been composed in a different way than the other letters. On the other hand, the subjects of the sentences are of substantially the same kind in all five letters. Even though it is dictated, the style of the letter to Norton is much less dense and complex than the public style. Occasionally, the letters do approximate the public style, when James is dealing with serious matters or when his audience is more than one. See for example the letters in Edel to a list of friends (664-68) and to Henry James III (759-62).

[7] Quoted in Page 75. Once again, there are a few examples of James's speech which approximate the public style. See for example James Whitall's recollection in

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Nowell-Smith 107 and Arthur Benson's in Page 112. Since these are the exceptions, we must wonder how much these men heard what they wanted to hear.

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